

Lives Lived

DOUGLAS H. FULLERTON

Creator of the world's longest skating rink, public servant, investment counsellor. Born in St. John's, Sept. 3, 1917; died in Ottawa, Dec. 21, aged 79.

FOR 140 years the people of Ottawa accounted themselves lucky if they got a few days skating on the Rideau canal that weaves through the city. The problem was always that after Ottawa's first freeze-up there would be snow, masses of it, too much to clear, so canal skating was a fleeting joy.

Then an investment counsellor named Douglas Fullerton was named chairman of the National Capital Commission. Why not make the whole canal a massive skating rink? he asked. Can't be done, said the wise bureaucrats. Why not? he asked. Never been done, replied the bureaucrats. Let's do it, said Mr. Fullerton.

And they did it. Where the ice was too thin for snowplows they produced small snowblowers, they assembled ice augers and portable gasoline pumps, bored holes in the ice and pumped up water to flood the surface. Winter did the rest. So, in 1971, after 140 years and a couple of weeks Ottawa had the world's longest skating rink — eight kilometres from the locks above the Ottawa river, just below the National Arts Centre, to the locks below Carleton University.

In those days I was living in Ottawa and we decided to celebrate the glistening canal with a skating party. It was in honour of Marjorie Nichols, a journalist friend who was moving to Vancouver. But we thought it would be only fitting to invite Doug Fullerton. It was, after all, his idea.

Aside from a cold spell that had dropped the temperature to minus 25, the only problem was that there had been several farewell parties for Marjorie earlier in the day. So when she finally arrived, it was without socks, mitts or jacket; but she did have two sets of speed skates over her shoulder. When she got to the canal she took a cartwheel tumble that nearly beheaded our dog.

Someone mentioned a race. It was that stage of that kind of party. Doug Fullerton, then 53, challenged Marjorie. To the Arts Centre and back, she said. It was a distance of about three kilometres. Soon she returned, breathing a little more heavily, but much recovered from her earlier celebrations.

Doug Fullerton returned some time later — bemused, red-faced and panting painfully. Until then he hadn't known that Marjorie had been a skating champion in Canada and Europe. Still, when he finally caught his breath he was smiling broadly. It was probably the first skating race on the Rideau Canal, his rink.

The canal typified the best of the Fullerton years — he was NCC chairman from 1969 to 1973. John Leaning, the former chief architect of the commission, sees it as quintessential Fullerton. Bull-headed and blunt, he got things done.

Getting things done was sometimes not easy. He suffered from a stutter that was agony to himself and others. It caused him to drop out of McGill in 1933, but he returned and earned two commerce degrees. Undeterred, he gave speeches, explaining that it was a form of self-improvement and that others would just have to put up with it. And, because it was Doug Fullerton, they did.

His years at the NCC were a large part of his public reputation but a small party of his public life. He established the financial foundations of the Canada Council; he advised Walter Gordon's royal commission on Canada's economic prospects. He advised various provincial governments, most notably Quebec's Jean Lesage government in the early 1960s.

Eric Kierans, a Quebec and then federal cabinet minister, recalls Mr. Fullerton as critical in the nationalization of Shawinigan Light and Power. Mr. Fullerton persuaded Mr. Lesage and his combative minister René Lévesque that all they had to do was borrow \$600-million in the United States, which, he said, would be no problem.

As Mr. Kierans recalls, "He gave them confidence in themselves." That was Mr. Fullerton, at the time, according to Mr. Kierans, the best investment counsellor in the business. The result was Hydro Québec. A few years later, Mr. Lesage wanted to borrow more and consulted Mr. Fullerton. In brusque and brutal terms Mr. Fullerton replied that he should forget the idea, that Quebec bonds were a glut on the market, that he should cut spending. Mr. Lesage was thunderstruck. But that, too, was Mr. Fullerton.

His was a time when public interest was esteemed, when government was the valued tool of public purpose. Such ideas are not now much in vogue, but their day will return. And some day there will be a monument to Doug Fullerton along the banks of the world's longest skating rink.

He leaves his wife Maude and three children.

John Gray

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Douglas Fullerton skating on his canal in 1972.